Wildwood

Working with the Woodland

If we work together with nature we will be in balance with the environment Working with nature's cycles also uses less energy and resources.

SUCCESSION CYCLE

The principle of succession is that any piece of grassland that is left undisturbed will eventually become forest over time. There are 4 stages to succession:

Grasses	nettles, bracken etc
Shrubs	brambles, buddleja etc
Small trees	pioneer trees - birch, willow, small trees – hazel etc
Canopy trees	oak, beech

WORKING WITH SUCCESSION

This natural tendency to close the canopy means that we may need to intervene to manage areas that we wish to remain at a particular point in the succession cycle. An example of where we might wish to do this is managing woodland tracks (rides) and clearings to maintain a sunny open stretch for flowers and butterflies. Ways to work with nature include making use of any naturally regenerated trees and allowing hedgerows to thicken up. The edge of two ecosystems such as a hedgerow, or a field where it meets with a woodland is the most bio-diverse of all.

DEADWOOD CYCLE

A tree has its own cycle of growth and decay, all stages being important. The final stages in a trees life are the most valuable for wildlife habitat but these stages are cut short in commercial woodlands. It is important to allow a percentage of trees to live out their full potential and become veteran trees. Standing deadwood is particularly valuable as a habitat but is rarely seen because of the tendency to remove dead trees either for appearance or safety reasons. Insects, fungi, mosses, lichens, invertebrates, amphibians and small mammals all rely on deadwood. Leaving piles of deadwood (out of direct sunlight) is good conservation practice.

Forest school activities may conflict with the need to leave deadwood in the wood – as fires and collecting firewood are an important feature of forest school. Bringing in some wood for your fires or using coppice management means you won't have to collect so much deadwood habitat. (NB Make sure everyone knows which is the firewood pile and which are the habitat piles – otherwise you will be burning all the wildlife that you have provided a home for!)

WHY WOODLAND MANAGEMENT IS NECESSARY

Woodlands used to cover a large area of Britain, and wildlife could move around relatively freely, enabling it to adapt to any changes. Today woodlands tend to be divided up into small fragmented areas, so wildlife is much more affected by any changes made within the woodland structure or ecosystem. Most existing woodlands were managed for many years, generally being coppiced in small sections by rotation. Demand for woodland products has fallen so coppice management has largely disappeared as a commercial activity. However, there are some species eg butterflies and dormice that have come to rely on this form of management, which provides a variety of different habitats at any one time – from freshly cut stumps surrounded by grassland to densely growing 8 year old multi-stemmed hazel. Forest schools often like to use the narrow rods provided by coppiced trees for den-building, however it is best to coppice a whole section of trees, to allow light in for regrowth to take place, rather than taking a few rods here and there which will be unable to regrow if they are in the shade of the canopy.

Management can maintain suitable conditions for a wide range of species, or may be carried out to control other less desirable species such as sycamore or rhododendron.

Whatever management you plan to carry out, make any changes gradually. Keep some areas for non-intervention – and 'no-go' for forest school.

It may be appropriate to plant up larger gaps with young trees, and encourage natural regeneration of young trees, to ensure a variety of ages of trees within the wood. Many woods were re-planted in entirety just after the war, so all the trees in the wood are the same age – around 50 – 60 years old and will therefore all die at around the same time. When planting in gaps, plant outside the canopy of the mature trees, to give the young trees the best chance.